



State of South Carolina
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This Legislature Backed Our Seniors

By André Bauer
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When the month of June rolls around in South Carolina there are a few things you can count on. The weather will be hot, peaches will start appearing in roadside stands, Gamecocks and Tigers will begin assessing their bowl game chances, and every newspaper will print an article outlining the successes and failures of another legislative session in Columbia. I'd like to add one more assessment of the General Assembly's work this year, speaking not necessarily as your lieutenant governor or the president of the Senate, but in my new role as the head of the South Carolina Office on Aging. I can say without hesitation that legislation passed this year had a tremendously positive impact on the 665,000 South Carolinians aged 60 and older.

First, we have taken a huge step forward in South Carolina by passing legislation that will encourage more physicians to receive specialist training in gerontology to meet the needs of our seniors. Today, there are only 30 geriatricians to treat 510,000 South Carolinians who are 65 years and older. It is imperative that we increase the number of these specialists because we know that as the Baby Boomers become the Senior Boom our over 65 population will swell to 1.3 million over the next 20 years. So, beginning immediately, we will forgive up to \$35,000 in educational loans for physicians who undertake this fellowship training and agree to practice in our state for at least five years. That's a win for seniors.

Each new doctor means more elderly persons will benefit from those specialized medical skills, and among those patients could be your grandmother, your mother, or yourself. This vision of a better tomorrow for our seniors was communicated tirelessly by the Silver Haired Legislature, AARP, and many, many others -- and our Legislature responded by unanimously passing the enabling legislation. That's a win for seniors.

Another success comes from the first expansion of the long term care ombudsman program that maintains a watchful eye over the seniors institutionalized in public and private nursing homes and residential care facilities. We have added five new professional, full-time ombudsmen, bringing South Carolina up to the national average of one ombudsman for every 2,000 long term care beds, and we did it by rearranging spending priorities within the Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging budget, not by increasing taxes. That's a win for seniors.

We also worked with the long term care industry, the Silver Haired Legislature and AARP to create a supplementary volunteer long term care ombudsman program that will work to improve the quality of life for our bed-bound seniors. These volunteers will come from your communities and will be trained to visit your institutionalized neighbors. Do you know that 60% of people in nursing homes never see an outside visitor? Creating a volunteer corps of friendly visitors is a win for seniors.

Families should be pleased that South Carolina has joined with three dozen other states to create a national, unified standard for creating living wills and health care powers of attorney. This means someone who executes these documents in our state could expect to have them honored and observed should they move to another state, and vice versa. That's a win for seniors.

We are approaching the first anniversary of the Legislature placing me in charge of the Office on Aging and thus making me the spokesperson for seniors and their issues. It is a responsibility that I do not take lightly. We have worked with the Silver Haired Legislature and AARP to bring realization and growing understanding that aging is about all of us. We have built partnerships and collaborations. The coming together of people in the private sector, organizations, institutions, and colleges and universities has unified our seniors' voices. And our Legislature has responded to this message. That's a win for seniors.